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A Fort Myers woman died while studying abroad. Her death joins rising concern of little data on safety

Jocelyn Grzeszczak, Fort Myers News-Press Published 9:00 a.m. ET Sept. 16, 2019 | Updated 9:46 a.m. ET Sept. 16, 2019

On a Thursday evening in early August, Tosha Thomas-Mora sat on the couch in her parents' Fort Myers home, running her fingers over two photographs of her oldest children.

Last July, Thomas-Mora's middle child, TeNiya Jones, [drowned off a beach \(/story/news/local/2018/07/30/missing-fort-myers-teen-teniya-jones-found-dead-drowned-israel/864380002/\)](#) in Tel Aviv, Israel, while she was on a seven-week exchange program in Amman, Jordan, practicing her Arabic language skills and learning more about Islamic culture.

TeNiya's death is among many in a student travel industry that experts say is eager to grow in scope, but not when comes to security.



Tosha Thomas-Mora looks at photos of her daughter TeNiya Jones at her parents' home in Fort Myers recently. TeNiya died last year after she got caught in a rip current in Israel while on a seven-week exchange program in Jordan. (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

"I think college is actually a safer experience on the whole," said Peter Lake, who directs Stetson University's Center for Excellence in Higher Education Law and Policy. "But what I'm noticing is there's a resistance to want to accept that reality — that there is some level of danger."

Concerns regarding student travel include a lack of transparent safety data, third party programs that may not be thoroughly vetted by colleges and universities, and trip guides who are not equipped with the proper licenses to lead students.

Many parents and educators are left asking themselves: Are students really safe while traveling abroad?

For Thomas-Mora, it has been a year of unfathomable tragedy. She lost her oldest child, Samuel Jones Jr., 22, in December 2017 in a [double homicide](#) ([/story/news/crime/2017/12/16/double-homicide-reported-lehigh-acres-said-sheriffs-office/958000001/](#)).

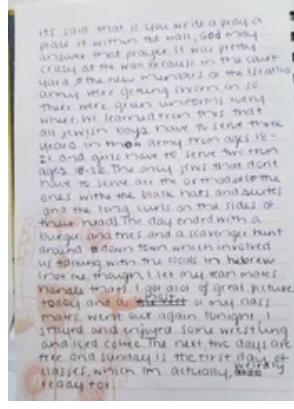


Pages from Briana McHam's journal while she was studying abroad in Israel. (Photo: Courtesy of Annette Blackwell)

Allowing her daughter, whom she affectionately called "Niya," to attend the program in Jordan, offered through the Council on International Educational Exchange, was not an immediate "yes."

"As parents you're like, 'Do you want them to do it?' Because you don't want to say no and miss out on the opportunity to live," said Thomas-Mora, whose youngest child is four.

TeNiya, who would have turned 20 in February, graduated from Dunbar High School in 2017. The ambitious, hard-working teenager began her freshman year at the University of Kentucky that fall, with dreams of joining the track team and eventually becoming a doctor.



Pages from Briana McHam's journal while she was studying abroad in Israel. (Photo: Courtesy of Annette Blackwell)

But while on a weekend trip to Tel Aviv, TeNiya and two friends from the same program decided to take a midnight swim in the Mediterranean. After getting caught in a rip current, the two others were able to swim to shore. TeNiya's body was found the next day.

Although Thomas-Mora read over every material TeNiya's program provided her, it never occurred to Thomas-Mora that the water was something she needed to warn her daughter about.

"It's just crazy, like those things that we don't even give a second thought," Thomas-Mora said. "And I guess because they didn't bring awareness to it."

This lack of transparency is something that two mothers who share Thomas-Mora's pain are currently fighting to change.



Tisha Thomas-Mora hugs her four-year-old daughter Naomi on Thursday, August 1, 2019, in Fort Myers. (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

Mothers seeking change

Nearly eight years ago, Elizabeth Brenner and Roshni Thackurdeens' sons boarded planes, eager to explore new corners of the world.

Thomas Plotkin, a sophomore at the University of Iowa, was headed to India to research ways to end human hunger. Ravi Thackurdeen, a sophomore at Swarthmore College, was bound for Costa Rica to study global health and tropical medicine.

Neither boy would return home.

Thomas slipped while hiking, falling head-first into the Gori Ganga River in northern India. Three days after his death in 2011, a friend who worked at the U.S. State Department called Brenner, asking if she knew that her son had been the program's 12th death.

"It was like, how did my son not know," Brenner said. "If I had known that my son was going with a program that thought that this constituted informed consent, he would never have gone with them. That's not fair."

Ravi drowned in 2012 while swimming with his group at Playa Tortuga, an obscure spot on Costa Rica's Pacific coast avoided even by locals, due to dangerous rip currents.

Fraught with grief, both mothers began searching for answers about their sons' premature deaths, soon discovering that they were not the first.

They realized there is also no publicly available comprehensive safety data from the student travel industry — or any organization, for that matter — that compiles and shares such statistics.

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"It's not that study abroad has necessarily gotten safer, it's that the industry has gotten much better at protecting itself," Brenner said.

The two grieving mothers eventually connected, seeking support from the other, but also eager for policy change. For Brenner and Thackurdeen, this was an issue bigger than just Thomas and Ravi.

"This is really about the way students are being given some information but not other information, and there are people within higher (education) who are O.K. with it continuing like that," Brenner said.

The pair formalized their national nonprofit, [Protect Students Abroad](https://protectstudentsabroad.org/) (<https://protectstudentsabroad.org/>), in 2015 with the primary goal of pushing legislators at both the state and federal levels to create a safety database for the student travel industry.

In 2016, Brenner and Thackurdeen published on the Protect Students Abroad website their own ad-hoc data on students who died while studying abroad, feeling confident that evidence-based science can better inform both students and their institutions.

"As long as there's no transparent safety database, what the implication for higher ed and for all schools," Brenner said, "is that each program is going to have every variation of a safety incident before knowledge is the same across all schools."

Studying the data on those who died while studying abroad

To some degree, humans are learning machines. They do well with correcting behavior after an accident occurs, Lake said.

But more could be done when it comes to looking into how and why student deaths occur while studying abroad.

"What Ros (pronounced 'Roz') and Elizabeth have put their fingers on is the fact that there's a whole swath of people who have passed away, and they haven't been studied effectively at all," said Lake, who met the pair when he invited them to attend Stetson's national conference on law and higher education. "This isn't just one person. This is a number of people and they fear remarkable patterns."

Pompano Beach resident Annette Blackwell remembers shopping for sun hats and water bottles with her daughter, Briana McHam, days before Briana was set to travel to Israel for a summer study abroad program through her school, Florida State University.

Briana, 20, was hiking with her group at Masada, an ancient fortress in southern Israel, on May 19, 2015, when she became separated from her group and was later found dead at the bottom of a ravine.

The autopsy report suggested that Briana suffered heatstroke, said her father, Lemonte McHam.



Briana McHam, a student at Florida State University, died in Israel while on a group hike with her study abroad program. (Photo: Courtesy of Annette Blackwell)

The day her group decided to hike was one of the hottest that year, so much so that the park had closed the trail Briana was hiking at 11 a.m., when the heat was at its most brutal.

But Briana and two other students were allowed to begin the walk down at 10:45 a.m., for reasons Blackwell and McHam are still struggling to understand.

"Why didn't they have expert guides? How was she left on the hill by herself? Why was she allowed to walk down the hill without a guide when it was closed in the park?" McHam wondered.

Although Briana's program was managed by FSU faculty, the university hired local guides who set up every excursion that happened outside the classroom, Blackwell said.

After their daughter's death, Blackwell and McHam discovered that the guide who led the Masada hike was not licensed.

"I felt like FSU should've been responsible of (Briana), to hire the right people, to check on things and make sure that they have the right credentials," Blackwell said.

Today, the Israel trip is no longer offered by FSU, and it can't be found on the school's website.

Blackwell and McHam looked into the process of filing a lawsuit against both the guide company and FSU, but their efforts were blocked by what many describe as an overly-complicated industry with lots of red tape and opposing interests.

These complications, Lake explained, range from competing jurisdictions to victim-blaming, a common issue in civil litigation.

Blackwell spoke with an FSU lawyer who sent Blackwell a certified letter stating that Briana had signed a waiver and was aware of any dangers.

"I said, 'So what you're saying to me is my daughter was aware that she was gonna die on Masada, she knew that whatever she did is her fault?'" Blackwell said. "(Briana) was a child. This was her first time leaving the country, and going to Israel. She didn't know what to expect."

The data that is available

Brenner and Thackurdeen, however, are confident that a mandated database which keeps track of incident evidence could help students and their families know what to expect, as well as advise program curriculums.

While the pair did create their own ad-hoc database, there is still no comprehensive safety data publicly available on the issue, despite efforts by leading industry organizations that claim to share the pair's same goal.

Bill Bull, vice president of risk management at the Council on International Educational Exchange, said he supports Brenner and Thackurdeens' goal of transparent safety data.

The Council, a leading nonprofit international exchange organization, has tracked incidents its students have reported for several years, Bull said.

"The concept of informing students of the risks that are out there, that's risk management 101," Bull said. "Don't hide from it. Embrace it, and then prepare for it, and be prepared to support students when it happens."

The Council, which managed TeNiya's program in Amman, Jordan, offers hundreds of programs all over the world for several different education levels. The vast majority of participants do not experience any sort of incident while abroad, Bull said.

The Council's database includes reported crime, environment and health-related incidents. Findings from 2016-2018 were published in a health, safety and security report available online (https://www.ciee.org/sites/default/files/content/documents/about/2019_hss_annual_report_final_190613.pdf).

These statistics are also shared with students, staff and partner schools so they can better understand the risks at hand, Bull said.

Another leading industry organization, the Forum on Education Abroad, has over 800 different members of higher education and works to develop the student travel industry's standards of good practice.

The Forum piloted its Critical Incident Database in 2009 as a free tool for its members to track the incidents that occur within their own programs and institutions.

The Forum collected the data and in 2015 published a report with numbers from the previous calendar year.

"Best practice is to know what's happening to your students," said Natalie Mello, vice president for programs, training and services at the Forum.

But the Forum's data has its limitations.

A 2016 [Newsweek article](https://www.newsweek.com/beau-solomon-pope-study-abroad-478200) (<https://www.newsweek.com/beau-solomon-pope-study-abroad-478200>) used it to declare that studying abroad was safer for students than studying on their home campuses, citing just two deaths documented by the Forum's data in 2014.

Brenner and Thackurdeens' ad-hoc data — which they argue is in no way complete or comprehensive — shows 14 students died while studying abroad that year.

According to the Forum, only 38 of its members were registered users of the Critical Incident Database in 2014. Just 21 of them responded to the voluntary survey, choosing to report their critical incidents from that year.

Additionally, data from Protect Students Abroad includes high school students and students who die while on pre- or post-program travel, whereas the Forum's data focuses solely on students in higher education who are harmed while participating in their programs.

The Forum also released reports in [2016](https://forumea.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ForumEA_InsuranceClaims_MortalityRateStudentsAbroad.pdf) (https://forumea.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/ForumEA_InsuranceClaims_MortalityRateStudentsAbroad.pdf) and [2018](https://forumea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ForumEA-Mortality-Rates-18.pdf) (<https://forumea.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ForumEA-Mortality-Rates-18.pdf>), compiled using data from two insurance companies that insure more than 50 percent of students who study abroad.

While the 2016 report used only one year of data, the 2018 report examined data across seven years and was recently published online by the *Journal of American College Health*.

The article's results found that students are less likely to die during study abroad experiences than on U.S. campuses.

But the risk between the two looks entirely different, both Brenner and Lake said.

"When you do risk management work, the one thing you know is when humans change environment to an unfamiliar place, risk multiplies," Lake said.

Shining a light on dangers when studying abroad

While attending college is a largely safer experience than some alternatives, the industry certainly isn't absolved of danger — especially when it comes to studying abroad.

"One of the things that Ros and Elizabeth have done is they've shone a flashlight on the fact that there are actually more people injured than you might imagine, that this is not an isolated phenomenon and requires some kind of attention," Lake said. "It's a problem screaming out for some law reform."

Now, the pair is focused on asking state and federal representatives to create a safety database in which incident reporting is both consistent and mandatory.

Minnesota passed the first bill of its kind in 2014, named after Brenner's son, who lived there at the time of his death. Virginia followed suit, passing similar legislation in 2016.

While the Minnesota bill has its limitations, it took the higher education industry by surprise, Brenner said. These days, the opposition is more organized.

Thackurdeen has been working on legislation in her home state of New York since 2018.

At the federal level, they have two bills in both the House and the Senate and are working to gather as much bipartisan support as possible.

"They go at data but from distinctly different places," Brenner said of the two bills. "The first one would impact higher education students. The second one actually would impact all American travelers."

Mello agrees that all study abroad programs should be transparently tracking what happens to their students, but remains unconvinced that federal legislation is the right way to go about it.



Tosha Thomas-Mora talks about her daughter TeNiya's death and the study-abroad company with which she was traveling on a recent evening. "They don't know the after affect that the parents have to deal with, going to therapy, trying to cope. They don't have to deal with the hurt. Just do it again next year." (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

Doing so would put reporting mechanisms as mandates, she said, referencing the Clery Act. Formally the Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, the Clery Act is a federal law requiring universities and colleges involved with federal financial aid programs to report on crime and safety on campus.

"What I have experienced and seen through the Clery Act is that reporting statistics does not lead to safer programs. It is not a function of risk management," Mello said. "It is a consumer approach, and just reporting statistics does not give you insight as to the context of what may have happened somewhere."

But higher education is a consumer-driven industry, Lake said.

"The product won't be sold unless the consumers buy it," he said. "At the end of the day, the real revolution comes with changing customer attitudes about safety."

It is only a matter of time until the industry sees what Lake refers to as inevitable change.

But for the grieving parents and families, that change feels slow.



Tosha Thomas-Mora talks about her daughter TeNiya Jones at her parents' home in Fort Myers recently. (Photo: Amanda Inscore/The News-Press USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

"Even though it's been a year, it seems like it was just recently," Thomas-Mora said. "I'm still coping and trying to find ways to get through."

For Thomas-Mora, it is difficult to imagine that the people promising grand adventures with their glossy brochures and sparkly websites could ever understand the pain her family is going through.

"Their life goes on. Their program goes on. They don't have to deal with the hurt," she said. "Just do it again next year."

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